

# Do the Scriptures teach that husbands should lead and exercise authority over their wives?

## Introduction

For most of my Christian life I lived with an understanding that the Biblical view of marriage was that husbands are called to lead and exercise authority over their wives. I think that idea mostly came from being exposed to the teaching of people like John Piper and Wayne Grudem, which in the church circles I moved in at the time were accepted without question.<sup>1</sup> What always confused me was that my own marriage to Catrina never functioned in a way that seemed to fit the model that was being taught. We, like most other Christians I knew, did marriage in a way where we shared the responsibility for decision making, played to each other's strengths, and had never got to a place where we could not agree and one of us needed to have the casting vote. Looking back on it I realise that although we seemed to have a pretty good marriage, I lived with a sense of anxiety that we were not doing it properly and I was failing to be the husband God wanted me to be and Catrina deserved.

It was only when I began to think through the issue of whether women should serve as elders in our church that I also started to re-evaluate what I had been taught about gender roles in marriage. As I started to read more widely than just Piper and Grudem I found that what they sought to present as the clear teaching of Scripture was anything but clear, and that the Bible seemed to present a view of marriage which looked far closer to the way Catrina and I worked out our marriage. That God's call in marriage is for husbands and wives to live in mutual submission to one another, sacrificially laying down their lives for one another with no sense of one partner being called to lead or exercise authority over the other.

This paper builds on my previous one: 'Is there a warrant from Scripture to appoint women elders in the contemporary church?'.<sup>2</sup> If you haven't read my previous paper then it would be really helpful if you at least read the opening remarks and the comments on orthodoxy, terms and kindness as well as the section on Genesis before reading this one.

This paper is arranged as follows:

- A recap of my conclusions on the teaching of Genesis with regard to gender roles.
- A review of the New Testament passages which quote Genesis 1-3 when talking about marriage to see whether the way these passages are used in the New Testament should change how we understand what Genesis teaches us.
- An examination of 1 Corinthians 7 which, for reasons I will explain, is I think the most important passage in the New Testament when attempting to answer the question this paper poses.
- An attempt to answer the question of what Paul means when he uses the word 'head' in Ephesians 5.

---

<sup>1</sup> For an example of one book which would strongly espouse this view see John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Crossway, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> You can find my previous paper here:

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AMA8zOIEwSIRI45C\\_LkBX2fWjRf5Pt7\\_/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AMA8zOIEwSIRI45C_LkBX2fWjRf5Pt7_/view)

- In the light of this understanding of ‘head’ a wider examination of what Ephesians 5 teaches us about marriage.
- Conclusions based on all of the above.

I want to acknowledge that although I have read a whole variety of books to get to the position I outline here (all of which are listed in the bibliography of my previous paper), the one which most shaped my thinking was *Men and Women in Christ* by Andrew Bartlett. If you wanted to dig more deeply into any of the passages examined here (and some which I have not) I would recommend starting with his book.

[Is this a Blood, Pen or Pencil issue?](#)

In my previous paper I laid out the idea that disagreements over doctrine can be split into three categories:

- **Blood issues** – these are core doctrinal issues that all Christians will agree on, such as the divinity of Christ or his bodily death and resurrection.
- **Pen issues** – these are issues Christians may differ over, but which a given church or denomination would take a position on. One example would be whether baptism involves a sprinkling of water or full immersion.
- **Pencil issues** – these are issues on which a church wouldn’t take a particular line. For Kerith examples would be the age of the earth or the order of events leading up to Jesus return.

As we saw in my previous paper, whether women can serve as elders is a pen issue. A church must take a position on what it believes because it impacts who can be considered for certain leadership roles.

In contrast the question we are considering here is a pencil issue. It is not my job, nor is it that of any of the leaders in Kerith, to tell any couple how to organise their marriage. Everyone in our community is free, in fact is encouraged, to come to their own conclusion based on their own reading of the Bible.

## Gender roles in marriage in Genesis

I am not going to repeat my analysis of Genesis chapters 1 to 3 here, other than to repeat my two conclusions.

The first is summarised by John Walton when he writes that:

‘Genesis 2 ... offers no establishment or articulation of gender roles. Regardless of what conclusions can be drawn about the issue as a whole once New Testament texts are considered, this text is concerned with human roles, not gender roles. Man and woman serve together’.<sup>3</sup>

This is as true within the marriage relationship between Adam and Eve as it is in the role each of them is called by God to play as they outwork their mandate to rule and to reign over the earth.

The second conclusion is that the first time there is an articulation of gender roles is in Genesis 3:16 where God says to Eve that ‘he will rule over you’. This comes after the fall and is not an expression of God’s original plan for how men and women should relate together, but part of our broken humanity which needs to find redemption in Christ.

One of the things we considered in the first paper was whether the way Genesis chapters 1 to 3 are quoted and used in the New Testament changes how we should interpret them.<sup>4</sup> There are only three places in the New Testament that verses from Genesis 1-3 are quoted in relationship to marriage:

- Jesus when teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:2-9 and Mark 10:2-12 quotes Genesis 1:27 (‘God made them male and female’) and Genesis 2:24 (‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’). The first speaks of the equal worth of both men and women, the second of the unity of husband and wife. Nothing about the way Jesus uses these verses tells us anything about them implying gender roles.
- Paul teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5:31 again quotes Genesis 2:24. He uses it to emphasise the unity that exists between a husband and wife, emphasising the one flesh nature of their union.<sup>5</sup> We will come back to this passage later, but for now I just want to note that Paul doesn’t use Genesis 2:24 to derive teaching about husbands leading or having authority over their wives.

We will now move on to see what the New Testament has to teach us on marriage.

---

<sup>3</sup> John H. Walton, ‘Genesis NIV Application Commentary’, *Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan* (2001): 191.

<sup>4</sup> This would certainly be true of in other cases, such as the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus which gain an understanding in the New Testament which goes way beyond what the original authors would have understood by them.

<sup>5</sup> Paul uses a shorter quote from Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians 6:16 to make a similar point with regard to those who unite themselves with prostitutes.

## 1 Corinthians 7

I think that this chapter is the right place to start our New Testament study for two reasons:

1. It is the longest passage in the New Testament on how husbands and wives should relate together in marriage.
2. It is the only teaching in the whole of the Bible on marriage which uses a word which unambiguously means either authority or leadership.<sup>6</sup>

Given the question we are attempting to answer this makes it very significant.<sup>7</sup>

In the opening verses Paul writes:

Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.  
(1 Corinthians 7:1-5)

What Paul teaches here, in the clearest possible terms, is that when it comes to sex and prayer the model for marriage is not male authority or leadership but mutual submission.

Firstly, when it comes to sex the husband should yield his authority over his own body to his wife, and the wife should yield her authority over her own body to her husband. The husband does not have unilateral authority over his wife. Instead each partner should yield to the authority of the other.

Secondly when it comes to prayer it isn't the job of the husband to be taking the lead or be making decisions as to how the couple pray together, but 'by mutual consent' they might choose together to abstain from sex for a season so that they can devote themselves to prayer.

For these two areas at least, a couple's sexual relationship and their prayer life, Paul is clear that equality and mutual submission are the way he expects decision making in the marriage to be structured. This seems very hard to reconcile with any position which argues that a husband is to exercise unilateral authority over every area of their marriage, as in at least these two areas Paul teaches mutual submission.

---

<sup>6</sup> The word here for authority is the Greek word *exousia*, which as we saw in my previous paper is Paul's standard word for authority.

<sup>7</sup> Despite this apparent significance, Andrew Bartlett notes that many of the books arguing for male authority in marriage (and in church leadership) either completely ignore 1 Corinthians 7 or only mention it in passing (an analysis of the books I have would confirm this to be the case). I think this is both unfortunate and somewhat baffling. Hopefully this will be addressed in future as we all seek to come to a common understanding of what the scriptures teach. Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), 18–20.

Is it possible that unilateral male authority and leadership in marriage is the general rule, but that sex and prayer are two exceptions where this doesn't apply? First of all, it should be noted that if this is the case then Paul singularly fails to make this clear. Instead, as we will see in a moment, the whole of the passage emphasises again and again the mutuality of the marriage relationship. Secondly, we are not dealing here with fringe areas of a marriage. Sex is at the heart of a couple's physical relationship, is the physical expression of the 'one flesh' relationship and is what differentiates a marriage from a close friendship. Similarly, prayer is at the heart of a couple's spiritual life. As Andrew Bartlett notes 'if there is equal authority and mutual submission at the physical and spiritual centres of the relationship, it would be strange indeed for there to be an overarching hierarchical relationship in less distinctive or less central matters'.<sup>8</sup>

In the whole of this passage Paul is careful to explicitly state the equality of men and women in marriage.

| <b>Verse</b> | <b>Who</b>   | <b>Instruction</b>   |
|--------------|--|--|
| 2            | each man, each woman   | Each should have sexual relations with the other                               |
| 3            | the husband, the wife  | Both should fulfil marital duty for sex  |
| 4            | the wife, the husband  | Both yield authority over their own body to their partner                      |
| 5            | each other   | Only abstain from sex in order to pray by mutual consent                       |
| 10 - 11      | a wife, a husband  | Same divorce restrictions for both   |
| 12 - 13      | husband with unbelieving wife, wife with unbelieving husband | Same rules on divorce for both   |
| 14           | wife, husband  | Both have same impact on unbelieving partner                                   |
| 15           | brother, sister  | Same rules for both if unbelieving partner leaves                              |
| 16           | wife, husband  | Both have same potential for saving their partner                              |
| 25 - 28      | man, virgin  | Same marriage advice for both sexes  |
| 32-34        | unmarried and married man, unmarried and married woman       | Singleness allows a greater focus on the Lord's affairs for both men and women |

---

<sup>8</sup> Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts*. Page 23.

Paul is at pains to point out the mutuality of each of these very varied areas of marriage. He is careful to give exactly the same instructions and lay the same expectations on both husbands and wives, emphasising again and again the equality and mutuality of their marriage relationship.

In summary in this passage, the longest in the New Testament on marriage and the only one to unambiguously address authority in the context of marriage, there is not even a hint of male only authority or leadership. Instead we see a recurring theme of equality and mutuality of husband and wife. There are also no grounds here for arguing that Paul teaches mutuality of authority in marriage with regard to sex and prayer, but unilateral male authority in every other area.

We will now move on to see whether this position is consistent with what Paul teaches in Ephesians 5.

## Ephesians 5 - What does head mean?

As you start studying what the Bible teaches on gender roles you quickly realise that establishing the meaning of certain Greek words is key. In my previous paper we saw the debate over what *authento* means in 1 Timothy 2:12. Here in Ephesians it is the word *kephalé* which comes into view. *Kephalé* means head, but the issue is what sense of head is meant. In English head has at least three meanings: head as in a physical head, head as in somebody in a position of authority such as a head teacher and head as in the source or head of a river. What about in Greek?

Many have embarked on an analysis of the use of *kephalé* in ancient literature to try to establish its Greek meaning.<sup>9</sup> Arguments go backwards and forwards but, in my opinion at least, don't really help us other than to reinforce the sense that head is as ambiguous in Greek as it is in English! As in English the only way to really discern it's meaning is to look at the context it is being used in.

There are three passages in Ephesians where Paul uses *kephalé*. Only one relates to marriage, but we are going to look at all three as I hope to show that for each one Paul makes it clear what he means by head.

### Ephesians 1

The first passage is Ephesians 1:22 where Paul writes:

That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.  
(Ephesians 1:19b-23)

The context here seems obvious. Jesus being head over everything means that Jesus is ruling and in authority over all things. This presents a difficulty for anyone trying to claim that Paul always means 'source' or 'origin' when he uses *kephalé*.

### Ephesians 4

The second use of head is in Ephesians 4:15:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.  
(Ephesians 4:15-16)

---

<sup>9</sup> One interesting approach is to see how the Hebrew word for head was translated into Greek in the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament). Philip Payne argues that in the overwhelming number of cases head is only translated as *kephalé* when it means source, but Wayne Grudem and others hotly contest this. Fortunately, I don't think we need to rely on these sorts of techniques as each time Paul uses *kephalé* it seems that we can derive the meaning from the context. Philip Barton Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 113–37. <https://www.waynegrudem.com/meaning-of-kephale-after-30-years>

Here the context makes it clear that Jesus being head is not about him being ruler and in authority over the church (although of course he is) but the deep connection and unity that exists between Jesus and his church, through which the church is nourished and built up. This presents a difficulty for anyone arguing that *kephalé* always means ‘authority’ or ‘leader’ when Paul uses it.

### Ephesians 5

The third reference to head is in Ephesians 5:23. Later on I will quote the whole section as we are going to work our way through it, but for now just verse 23 will suffice:

For the husband is the head of the wife  
as Christ is the head of the church,  
his body, of which he is the Saviour.

In what sense does Paul use head here? Well I think he makes it clear, although our NIV translation obscures it slightly. In the NIV the last statement of verse 23 is ‘his body, of which he is the Saviour’. This reverses the order of ‘Saviour’ and ‘body’ when compared with what he actually wrote, which is literally:

For [the] husband is head of the wife  
as also Christ [is the] head of the church  
he Himself Saviour of the body.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in verse 23 we have three matching pairs which Paul lists each time in the same order. These pairs are:

|                |        |
|----------------|--------|
| Husband (head) | Wife   |
| Christ (head)  | Church |
| Saviour        | Body   |

Paul clearly links Christ as head with Christ as Saviour, making it very obvious how he wants head to be understood in this context (later we will consider what it means for a husband to be saviour to his wife).

If rather than saviour Paul wanted head to mean authority there are a multitude of words or phrases he could have used in place of saviour to make that clear – authority, leader, lord, ruler, decision maker, boss, chief would all have made clear. We saw in Ephesians 1 that Paul does sometimes use head this way, but Paul doesn’t use any of those words here. This makes it very hard to argue that Paul has authority in mind when he uses head in Ephesians 5.

Now or but

Having established that here in Ephesians 5 head means ‘saviour’ this clears up something confusing about the first word of the next verse, which the NIV translates this way:

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/ephesians/5-23.htm>



Now as the church submits to Christ,  
so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.  
(Ephesians 5:24)

The confusing thing is that the word translated 'now' is the Greek word *alla*, which everywhere else in the NIV (it appears over 400 times) is translated 'but' or 'however', and introduces something which is in contrast to what has gone before.<sup>11</sup> If we read head as meaning authority then 'but' would make no sense here. Wives submitting to their husbands would be the logical outworking of their husbands being in authority over them and the logical word to use to start this verse would be 'therefore'. This is why I suspect the NIV translators go for their slightly ambiguous and very unusual 'now', which wrongly suggests that verse 24 continues the thought pattern of verse 23.

However, if we read head as saviour then 'but' makes total sense, because somebody being my saviour doesn't imply that I should submit to them. As an example, if I am saved from drowning by a lifeguard then I am likely to be very grateful to that person for rescuing me, but that gratitude doesn't extend to me submitting to them. However, despite defining head as saviour Paul does still want wives to submit to their husband, and so introducing that idea with 'but' makes perfect sense.

#### In everything

As a final point on verse 24 it is worth noting that Paul says that wives should submit to their husbands 'in everything'. If what Paul has in mind here is a one way flow of authority from husband to wife in every area of life, as opposed to mutual submission to one another, then 'everything' would seem to contradict what we saw earlier in 1 Corinthians 7 where Paul made it clear that in the areas of sex and prayer husbands and wives should model mutual authority and submission. This again indicates that by head Paul doesn't mean unilateral authority or leadership.

#### Conclusion

All of this reinforces for me that it is right to reject the idea of head meaning 'ruler' or 'authority' here, and instead let it mean what Paul says it means, which is 'saviour'. This conclusion is further strengthened by how Paul goes on to describe in detail what he means for the husband to be 'saviour' to his wife which we will consider in the next section.

---

<sup>11</sup> Strong's Concordance gives a definition for *alla* of 'otherwise, on the other hand, but' and lists its usage as 'but, except, however' (<https://biblehub.com/greek/235.htm>). 'Now' doesn't fit any of those definitions. Other translations such as the King James Version (KJV) go even further, translating *alla* as 'therefore', completely reversing its meaning. Still others such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) get round the problem by simply missing the word out completely!

## Ephesians 5 – The Whole Passage

Having established that by head Paul means saviour we can now look at the whole of the passage.

### Household Codes

Ephesians 5 is what in the ancient world would have been called a household code. These were instructions written to regulate both family and civil life in the Greco-Roman world. Roman law gave enormous authority (*Patria Potestas*) to a husband over his family, described as:

‘the power of the head of a Roman family over his wife, children, agnatic (male side) descendants, slaves, and freedmen including originally the right to punish by death and always embracing complete control over the limited personal and private rights and duties of all members of the family’<sup>12</sup>

The practical outworking of these rights were described in these household codes. As Philip Payne notes these secular codes ‘directly address only the duties of the party in authority (not the subordinate wife, children or slaves) and ‘focus only on the patriarch controlling his wife, children and slaves’.<sup>13</sup>

New Testament versions of household codes can be found in Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; Titus 2:1-10 and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7. These primarily deal with the relationships between husbands/wives, parents/children and masters/slaves.

Paul and Peter are writing to Christian communities living under *Patria Potestas*, producing a code which could be used by these fledgling Christian communities.

### Back to the beginning

The passage starts this way:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.  
Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.  
For the husband is the head of the wife  
as Christ is the head of the church,  
his body, of which he is the Saviour.  
(Ephesians 5:21-23)

The whole of this section on marriage begins with Paul commanding mutual submission. This is entirely consistent with what we have already seen Paul teach about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, but is a radical departure from the secular household codes which were all about one party having control or authority over another.

In some Bibles the connection between verses 21 and 22 gets obscured because a section heading gets inserted between the two verses.<sup>14</sup> This might give the impression that Paul’s

---

<sup>12</sup> Merriam-Webster dictionary - <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patria%20potestas>

<sup>13</sup> Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 271.

<sup>14</sup> As an example the 1984 NIV has verse 21 at the end of a section entitled ‘Living as Children of light’ and verse 22 at the start of a new section entitled ‘Wives and Husbands’.

teaching on mutual submission is the conclusion to the previous section, but this would be wrong. The literal translation makes this clear:

Be submitting yourselves to one another in reverence for Christ:  
wives as to the own husbands, as to the Lord;  
for [the] husband is head of the wife,  
as also Christ [is the] head of the church,  
He Himself Saviour of the body.<sup>15</sup>

Note that the word submit doesn't actually appear in the instruction to wives, it has to be inferred from the preceding instruction to submit to one another. This indicates that Paul isn't starting a whole new idea in verse 22 but continuing his train of thought from the previous verse. Mutual submission is the context in which wives are being instructed to submit to their husbands. Yes, wives are to submit to their husbands, but husbands are also to submit to their wives.

Paul gives two reasons for this submission:

- Mutual submission is 'out of reverence for Christ'. This is the same phrase that Paul uses in Colossians 3:22 describing how slaves should submit to their slave masters.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that in that case slave masters have no God given authority over slaves. This indicates that for Paul submission is not always because the person submitting is under the authority of the person being submitted to, but can flow out of our relationship with Christ.<sup>17</sup>
- Wives are to submit to their husbands because marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. In this picture the husband represents Christ as Saviour and the wife represents the church. Just as the church willingly and joyfully submits to Christ, wives in the same way wives are to submit to their husbands.

Note that in neither case are wives told to submit to their husbands because they are the leaders in the marriage or have authority over them. In fact, if wives were instructed to submit to their husbands because of their authority this would break the Christ / church picture. As followers of Jesus we don't submit to him because we have to, or are obliged to because he rules over us, but as a willing and joyful response to his love for us. As John writes:

We love because he first loved us.  
(1 John 4:19)

We see two ways here in which Paul's household codes differs radically from the secular ones. First of all, it addresses the wives (as well as the slaves and children) directly, rather

---

<sup>15</sup> <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/ephesians/5-21.htm>, <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/ephesians/5-22.htm> and <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/ephesians/5-23.htm> including the punctuation.

<sup>16</sup> 'Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.'

<sup>17</sup> Many of us might wish that Paul had directly outlawed slavery in these fledgling Christian communities, but to do so would have caused uproar and hampered their ability to preach the gospel. Instead he plants what Tom Holland calls 'a depth charge beneath the foundations of the classical world' which in time will explode with huge positive implications for slaves. NT Wright & Tom Holland 'How St Paul changed the world' - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlf\\_ULB26cU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlf_ULB26cU)

than only speaking to husbands and slave masters. This must have spoken to each of these groups of people on their value in this new Christian community that Paul would write and address them directly.

What does it mean for a wife to submit to her husband?

It would have been no surprise to wives to be told that they were to submit to their husbands. This would have been the prevailing cultural expectation. However, I think there would have been four things about the nature of their submission which would have surprised them:

1. They would have been surprised to have been addressed at all. Roman household codes were only ever addressed to the people in power – the husbands, the parents and the slave owners.
2. They would have been surprised that their submission was to be matched by the mutual submission of their husbands. Perhaps that wouldn't have been such a shock to wives who had heard Paul preach on marriage – he wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus so I like to imagine that some of the Ephesian wives had already heard Paul preach live what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 7 about the mutual exercise of authority in marriage.
3. They would have been surprised by the reasons for their submission. Wives in the ancient world had to submit because it was the law, the *Patria Potestas*. This would presumably have led to a submission which was given grudgingly and dutifully. Paul says that wives should submit because of their love for Jesus and their desire to model the unity between Christ and the church to the world, in which they are to model the submission of the church to Christ. This is a submission which is given willingly and joyfully. By submitting to their husbands in this way, rather than grudgingly and dutifully, wives were to model something very different to what would be seen in the secular marriages around them.
4. Finally wives would have been surprised by the instructions given to their husbands, which we will now consider.

What does it mean for a husband to be saviour to his wife?

A husband being a saviour to his wife seems like a strange concept. Wives aren't saved, set free from sin, reconciled to God or given access to the Father through their husband. Jesus is the Saviour of the wife in the same way that he is for the husband. So what does Paul mean by the husband being saviour? Well just as with defining what he means by head, Paul is clear on what being a saviour husband looks like.<sup>18</sup> He says:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no-one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does

---

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly the instructions to husbands are over three times as long as the instructions to wives. I think this is because it is the attitude and behaviour of husbands Paul is primarily looking to challenge and show to be very different to the prevailing cultural expectations.

the church – for we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

(Ephesians 5:25-33)

There are four expressions here of how a husband should act as saviour to his wife:

- He is to love his wife as Christ loved the church, giving himself up for her (v25)
- He is to love his wife as his own body (v28)
- He is to feed her and care for her as Jesus does for the church (v29)
- He is to love her as he loves himself (v33)

All of these speak of husbands modelling Christ’s loving, sacrificial actions as our Saviour, and flesh out what Paul means by husbands being the head in the marriage. None of these speak of husbands being the head of their wives by exercising leadership in the marriage or having authority over them.

The ultimate expression of love is to give yourself for another person. As Jesus says:

Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

(John 15:13)

We see this willingness of Jesus to treat others as more important than himself (even though they aren’t) again and again. He washed his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-17), he humbled himself and took the nature of a servant (Philippians 2:7-8), he came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:43-45). In these ways and many others Jesus submits himself to the church, giving himself up for her. We as the church are to respond by denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus (Mark 8:24), modelling the mutual submission he is appealing for here between husband and wife.

Some have argued that Paul doesn’t directly tell husbands to submit to their wives. I would disagree with this because the whole of this section begins with a command to ‘submit to one another’. It could also be similarly noted that Paul doesn’t tell wives to love their husbands, but I don’t think anybody would suggest that this means wives shouldn’t love their husbands. Finally, I think the whole thrust of Paul’s command for husbands to act as saviour is about them sacrificially giving themselves for their wives and putting them first. If that isn’t Biblical submission, then I’m not sure what it is.

I noted in the previous section the impact that wives submitting to their husbands, not grudgingly and dutifully but joyfully and willingly, would have had on a watching world. I similarly want to note the impact that husbands not controlling their wives and taking them for granted but sacrificially loving them, caring for them and preferring them would have had.

## Conclusion

I set out to answer the question of whether the Scriptures teach that husbands should lead and exercise authority over their wives. For me the answer is a resounding no.

There are no passages in the Bible which unambiguously talk about marriage and leadership. The only passage in the Bible which talks unambiguously about marriage and authority (1 Corinthians 7) teaches mutual authority of the husband over his wife and the wife over her husband.

What the Bible does teach is the mutual submission of husband and wife. In this mutual submission the wife models the church, willingly and joyfully submitting herself to her husband, and the husband models Jesus as Saviour, sacrificially giving himself for his wife.

What does this actually look like in practice? Well I think it will look different in every marriage. Every couple are different in terms of their respective strengths and weaknesses, what brings them joy and what exhausts them. Therefore, mutual submission will look different in every marriage. In one marriage the wife may be better with money and oversee the finances, in another marriage it may be the husband and in yet another they may share the responsibility. In one marriage it may be the husband who takes a career break to care for young children, in another it may be the wife and in yet another they may share the responsibility. Every couple needs to talk honestly and openly about how their particular marriage is going to work, free from cultural expectations, free from family expectations and free to model in their own way the unity of Christ and his church to a watching world.

## Bibliography

Bartlett, Andrew. *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts*. Inter-Varsity Press, 2019.

Payne, Philip Barton. *Man and Woman, One in Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009.

Piper, John, and Wayne Grudem. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Crossway, 2006.

Walton, John H. 'Genesis NIV Application Commentary'. *Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan* (2001).